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El Toyonal to lose school bus service

By Sora O'Doherty



School bus on El Toyonal. Photo A. Scheck
of bus stops.

The Lamorinda School Bus Program is planning to drop all school bus stops on the narrow, twisty El Toyonal Drive because the stops have been deemed unsafe and in violation of the California Vehicle Code.

Following the release of a safety study of all LSBP routes, patrons of the school buses that serve Wagner Ranch Elementary School and Orinda Intermediate School were called to a meeting where plans to eliminate the El Toyonal route were disclosed. Stunned, the families asked the LSBP to delay the decision, so the LSBP has agreed to a second meeting to be held at 7:30 p.m. June 8.

Many residents, like Christina Loughran and Michelle Swaney, are upset with the decision and said would be willing to sign a waiver not to sue based on any violation of Vehicle Code Section 22504 regarding the placement

Juliet Hansen, LSBP program manager, says she thinks that such a waiver will make no difference in the decision to close the route, although she did say that she would consult legal counsel on the question. Hansen said that First Student, the school bus operator, has had to tow buses out of a ditch on El Toyonal a number of times. Other incidents include hitting mail boxes and a 2014 sideswipe incident that resulted in the bus driver being cited and a driver's license suspension of 30 days. Not all incidents are reported, Hansen added.

Both a hired consultant and the California Highway Patrol reviewed a number of routes in Lamorinda. LSBP put together a list for the CHP to review and asked for "bus stop ahead" signs in several places.

The CHP denied all of LSBP's requests, leading to the cancellation or removal of a number of stops, mostly in Orinda due to the topography, a few in Lafayette and less in Moraga. Hansen added that Lafayette and Moraga and even other places in Orinda were able to adjust the routes to allow for compliant stops, but there is nothing that will help the stops on El Toyonal become compliant with the safety statute.

Loughran and Swaney said they do not believe that safety is the motivation behind the closure, citing studies that children are more 70 percent more likely to get to school safely on a school bus, and the students on El Toyonal have been safely riding the school bus for 20 years. They say that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says, "Bus is best."

One reason that these parents believe that the school bus is safer for children than transport in parents' cars is that the people who live in the El Toyonal area respect the school bus; when they see it, they slow down - a courtesy not always granted to private cars. The two women said that families who planned to start using the school bus next year were not notified of the meeting. Loughran said that she would not have purchased her home but for the existence of the school bus route.

Hansen agreed that it is generally true that students are safer in buses than private cars, but noted that consultants do not necessarily believe that this is the case for El Toyonal. "Once we saw where the story was going, we tried to come up with a way to serve the neighborhood," she said, but found that there was no safe alternative. LSBP thought of Orinda Park Pool, but the driveway is very narrow and the sight distance for the left turn is insufficient. They also looked at the end of Canon or Rio Vista as turn-around spots, but they weren't sufficient. Nor was there adequate parking on Camino Pablo for parents.

Although the goals are traffic mitigation and to provide as much service as possible, Hansen said that safety is the LSBP's foremost priority and is what is driving the closure. Hansen has met with Orinda Public Works Director Larry Theis, who will be talking to the school bus consultants.

There are also changes to other bus routes in the Orinda area, affecting Glorietta Elementary, Sleepy Hollow Elementary and Wagner Ranch Elementary to Orinda Intermediate and Miramonte High schools. The entire safety study can be read at <http://nebula.wsimg.com/0f5cb3db449c60f389e8d08cad940afb?AccessKeyId=ACBAD635E8DD86102CE4&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

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